How Sunshine Improves Mental Health

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As a society, we typically gravitate to sunlight and bright spaces, whether at home, at work or when out and about. Dark homes and workspaces carry a negative connotation more often than not, but some may not know why. The tendency of humans to be drawn to light, however, is rooted in biological and psychological reasons. Modern science answers questions like “Is sun good for depression?” and has helped us realize the link between the sun and mood, the positive effects of the sun and how we can best incorporate it into our lives.

What Does the Sun Do for Us?

The human body synthesizes or creates vitamin D when it’s given the adequate amount of exposure to ultraviolet B rays. There are two types of vitamin D, known as D2 and D3. The human body creates vitamin D3, so it’s the most natural form and the easiest for the body to break down. Vitamin D, once made usable through various processes in the body, aids in the absorption of calcium, phosphorus and other vital nutrients.

Vitamin D is known to be important for bone growth, bone remodeling, cell growth and immune function. It can help reduce inflammation in the body, which is thought to be a contributor to cardiovascular disease, cancers and numerous chronic inflammatory disorders. Vitamin D’s role in conjunction with calcium can help [**reduce osteoporosis in older adults**](https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/VitaminD-HealthProfessional/).

Scientists believe there is a link between low vitamin D levels and different mood disorders. The vital nutrient also boosts the body’s sensitivity to insulin. It’s important for the body to retain its insulin sensitivity to avoid Type 2 diabetes, which can occur when a person’s body becomes insulin resistant.

The Sun Aids Mental Health: True or False?

Sunshine continues to receive attention in wellness and medical circles as one of the best natural resources for the body in existence. Science has proven that this notoriety is well deserved. Research has found that exposure to nature can improve stress responses. The sun, specifically, is linked to [**improvements in psychological health**](https://fherehab.com/learning/technology-and-mental-health), especially in people with mental health disorders.

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Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Sunlight

Some researchers believe that vitamin D deficiency is a risk factor for [**obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**](https://fherehab.com/mental-health-rehab/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/). Studies of children with OCD found that there may be a link between the prevalence of the disorder and a lack of vitamin D in the body. There have also been rare cases of seasonal OCD reported. One of the treatments in these cases is phototherapy, where a person is exposed to bright light for a period of time to increase vitamin D levels. It is often an effective solution for people in cold climates with limited sun exposure during the winter months.

Is Sun Good for Depression and Anxiety?

Preliminary findings have found that the answer to the question “Is sun good for depression?” is yes. While definitive evidence isn’t available, some research has shown that people who receive increased vitamin D exposure, especially from the sun, have an improved mood. When these people are tested for depressive symptoms, their score is often lower than before their exposure.

The receptors of vitamin D are located throughout the brain, and many are in regions that are related to mood disorders. In some groups of people, higher [**levels of anxiety**](https://fherehab.com/anxiety/understanding) and emotions related to anxiety correlated with lower levels of vitamin D. Exposure, however, mitigated some of these feelings and symptoms in some people studied.

How Sunlight Correlates With Seasonal Affective Disorder

[**Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**](https://fherehab.com/news/5-tips-seasonal-affective-disorder/) is gaining attention among medical professionals as a mental health disorder that plagues many people during the winter months, when less sunshine is available. One benefit of sunshine that can help [**people with SAD**](https://www.mentalhealth.gov/what-to-look-for/mood-disorders/sad) is the effect it has on melatonin production. Melatonin is a chemical that aids in regulating the sleep cycle and helps people sleep more soundly. People who are exposed to bright sunlight early in the day synthesize melatonin sooner at night, making it easier to sleep. Like people with seasonal OCD, seasonal affective disorder can also be treated at times with phototherapy that imitates sunlight, which has shown promising results so far.

Other Mental Health Disorders and Sun Exposure

Some research has found that sunlight exposure in the first year of an infant’s life can reduce their risk of developing schizophrenia. Vitamin D levels in people with schizophrenia have also been found to be lower than the average person. Sunlight might help aid vitamin D production in people with schizophrenia.

People with [**bipolar disorder**](https://fherehab.com/bipolar/early-signs) may experience a worsening of symptoms when fall and winter set in and less sunlight is present. Increased [**suicidal tendencies**](https://fherehab.com/learning/isolation-fuels-depression-and-suicide/) may also occur. Light therapy may ease symptoms in people with bipolar depression.

Other Outdoor Mood-Boosters

One study on [**vitamin D and mood disorders**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2908269/) highlighted the fact that it’s “possible that persons who are outdoors may be more physically active” and concluded that “it is important to consider whether sunshine alone or in combination with physical activity is related to improved mood.” Walking outdoors also might be linked to improved mood, although evidence is inconclusive. It may be that since most people’s limited time outdoors is spent exercising, the [**positive effects**](https://fherehab.com/learning/outdoor-therapy-mental-health/) they may feel after exposure to the sun and elements is a result of their physical activity.

How You Can Work More Sunshine into Your Life

The benefits of sunshine are abundant. The best way to expose yourself to more sunshine — and thus more vitamin D — is to spend more time safely outside. Brief sun exposure in a safe manner with sunblock and at times of day with less risk of sunburn can help boost vitamin D levels. Consider exercising outside in pleasant weather and spending short breaks at work in the sun. If you’re a business owner, CEO or employer, consider incorporating natural surroundings and sunlight into your workspace and employees’ days. People who endeavor to bring more sunlight into their days may see benefits in their mental and physical health.

If sunlight isn’t enough to lift your mood and you’ve been experiencing mental health problems, reach out to us today by calling us. No one should struggle with their mental health on their own, and our compassionate and sensitive team is ready to help.